

Eye See So That Eye Can Learn

Susan Ramsay

Early Literacy Specialist, Hastings-Frontenac-Lennox & Addington *613-354-6318 (ext 32)*

Did you know that approximately 80% of all learning during a child's first 12 years of life comes through vision? The significance of good vision to children's learning ability and educational success is undeniable.

Did you also know that 60% of children with learning difficulties or behavioural challenges have an undiagnosed vision problem? (Vision Council of America) Ten percent of preschoolers have vision deficiencies and this percentage increases to 20% by the time children reach high school. (Canadian Association of Optometrists)

Reading instruction helps children recognize and interpret print. We know that hearing plays an important role in children's ability to hear sounds in words and connect them to letters, but the powerful role of vision in reading is often glossed over.

Babies are born with an initial focusing distance of 20-30 cm. – cradling distance from the crook of your arm to your eyes. Parents and caregivers who keep toys within their baby's focusing distance, alternate their baby's position in their arms and crib, and who hang mobiles above the crib or change table (high contrast black and white mobiles are favourites), are already stimulating the development of their baby's visual skills.

But healthy vision includes much more than the ability to focus on objects near and far. It includes the ability to use both eyes together, to aim the eyes accurately and move them smoothly and quickly from one object to another and across a page, and to see things to the side when looking straight ahead. It includes the ability to coordinate eyes with hands, as well as accurately perceive colour.

Many parents, caregivers or educators assume that a child who sees with 20/20 vision sees well. Though 20/20 does mean that a child sees objects at 20 feet that he or she should be able to, it does not necessarily mean that a child's eyes are healthy and disease free. Children often don't comment on difficulty seeing because they have never known anything different.

Amblyopia ("lazy eye") results from either a misalignment of a child's eyes, such as crossed eyes, or a difference in image quality between the two eyes (one eye focusing better than the other.) In both cases, one eye becomes stronger, suppressing the image of the other eye. If not corrected, the weaker eye can become useless. Vision loss from amblyopia is 100% treatable if caught early. Unfortunately one half of all cases of amblyopia are not diagnosed until after the age of 5 when it is difficult to correct.

When should children have their first eye exam? The Canadian Association of Optometrists recommends taking your child for an eye exam at 6 months, 3 years, and again before their fifth birthday. They recommend an annual eye exam for children from 6-19 years of age. Children don't need to know their ABCs for a comprehensive eye examination, and in Ontario the cost of these optometrist appointments are covered through OHIP.

October is Eye Health Month – a time for us to focus on what children see every day.